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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an alternative certification program that was developed to address the shortage of certified special education teachers in West Virginia. The goal of the program is to provide students from a noneducational background with opportunities at the master's degree level to become special education teachers in one of three categories: mental retardation, specific learning disabilities, or behavior disorders. In addition to general admission requirements, noneducation majors must pass the Pre-Professional Skills Test and the Multi-Subjects Content Specialization test and complete six prerequisite courses before beginning special education certification coursework. To obtain certification, students must complete 12 hours of core courses, 9 hours of certification area specialization courses, and 18 hours of required degree courses. After completing the coursework, students must pass the Content Specialization test in the area in which they seek endorsement. Since 1986, 116 students from noneducational backgrounds have sought admission to the program. The average student was 34.6 years of age, had 2 children, and was employed full-time. In order to meet the needs of these nontraditional students, coursework is offered by faculty who travel to various sites in the state, through distance education courses, and through alternative class meeting schedules. Of the 116 students, 62 have completed all certification requirements, 49 are currently employed as special education teachers in the state, and 43 have remained employed in the school system in which they were initially hired. (LP)

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STEMMING TEACHER TURNOVER IN RURAL SETTINGS: A FOLLOW-UP STUDY

Historically, teacher shortages in critical certification areas such as special education have generated extensive dialogue between public education (K-12) and teacher education programs. West Virginia, a very rural and sparsely populated state has been no stranger to these discussions. A review of the West Virginia Department of Education's annual reports, Supply/Demand of Educational Personnel, for the last nine years revealed that nearly one of every three educators assigned to special education settings serve don some type of sub-standard license. Further, the percentage of personnel on emergency licenses did not decline significantly in spite of the efforts of both public and higher education.

Investigations into the nature of chronic special education teachers shortages revealed a number of interesting factors contributing to this problem. One fact which became immediately apparent was that there was actually no shortage of fully certified personnel in some areas of exceptionality. For example, in 1995-96, there were 2311 fully certified mental retardation professionals teaching in West Virginia (West Virginia Department of Education, 1996). During the same year, there were 1137 employees, 19.1 percent were serving on sub-standard licenses. The same pattern existed for other areas of assignment for a number of years. The illusion of "shortage" was created by state code and regulation which allow certified general educators to use emergency licensure as an entry-level route to secure employment, obtain full licensure in special education while at the same time accruing seniority within their school district. Then, when a general education position opens, the recently licensed special educator may use their senior status to "bid out", leaving yet another assignment to be filled on an emergency-licensure basis. Recognition of this problem served as a primary force in the development of an alternative certification track for students whose formal training was in a field other than education. Prior to describing this program, it is important to set the context within which the development of the alternative program occurred.

Overview-Alternative Teacher Certification

Koff, Floris and Crouin (1976) described traditional teacher certification as a process developed to assure that those who enter the teaching profession meet some set of minimum competency standards. Each state has the latitude to set these standards and a document developed by the National Association of Directors of Teacher Education and Certification annually describes these requirements. Typically, traditional certification programs included specific credit hour requirements to be earned from higher education institutions in the content (subject) area, professional studies (e.g. methodology) and in practica (student or practice teaching). Colleges and universities typically verify that the candidate has met minimum credit hour standards at which time many state education agencies also require successful completion of competency tests prior to the issuance of the certificate.

Alternative teacher certification, within the context of this paper, may be described as a departure from the more traditional undergraduate route through teacher education programs. In addition, the program to be described differed from traditional certification by establishing a different target population and length of training rather than in program content, vigor or expected outcome.s This was consistent with the position advocated by Smith et al. (1985). Further, the features of alternative programs recommended by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education were adopted and included rigorous admissions standards, curriculum appropriate to the beginning teacher, a supervised internship and competency examinations in both the subject field and professional studies.

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The alternative program described in this paper is one of a series of programs offered among the states for the purpose of attracting quality adults who already have at least a bachelor's degree into the teaching profession. As of September 1995, nineteen states had alternative certification programs that were recognized in the most recent National Center for Education Information report (1995) on alternative teacher certification.

Program Description

The goal of the alternative special education program is to provide educational opportunities for students at the post-bachelor's and master's degree level to become teachers of exceptional children in one of three categories: mental retardation, specific learning disabilities, or behavior disorders. Individuals seeking certification in the areas of mental retardation, learning disabilities, and behavior disorders may come into the program from non-education fields.

Program experiences in special education involve examining traditional and contemporary practices, using the terminology of the field, and identifying the characteristics of each group of exceptional children relative to historical, environmental, educational, cultural, legal and political conditions. The utilization of standardized and criterion referenced diagnostic tests in the cognitive and affective areas is also a part of program experiences.

Developing cognitive and affective diagnostic hypotheses for each child and generating and translating those data into educational programming are stressed in the program. Selecting and developing materials, determining appropriate approaches to instruction, and developing and using behavioral objectives are of principal importance. Additionally, planning and developing a total teaching environment that promotes effective learning through flexible scheduling in a variety of administrative arrangements are required experiences in the alternative special education program.

GENERAL ADMISSION REQUIREMENTS

Students seeking admission to the Special education Program must submit the following:

1. Official transcripts from all colleges or universities (an undergraduate GPA of 3.0 or above is preferred);
2. Three recommendations on forms available in the Office of Admission and Records;
3. Detailed personal statement of life and work experiences and career goals and aspirations regarding special education; and
4. Score on the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) Aptitude Test. A score of 900 or above is preferred. This requirement is waived for applications holding a graduate degree.

Additional Admission Requirements for Non-Education Majors Seeking MR, SLD, or BD certification must:

In addition to the general admission requirements stated above, non-education majors seeking K-12 MR, SLD, or BD certification must:

1. Take and pass the Pre-Professional Skills Test (PPST) before enrolling in any special education certification coursework. The PPSt is waived upon documentation from a single test administration of the American College Testing Program (ACT) composite

score of 25 or above, an enhanced ACT score of 26 or above, or a scholastic Achievement Test score of 1035. The PPST is waived for individuals with a graduate degree.

2. Complete the following prerequisite courses with a GPA of 3.25 before beginning special education certification coursework:

Ed. 500	-	Survey: Introduction, History of Education	3 hrs. and Philosophy
Ed. 516	-	Human Development	3 hrs.
Rdng. 525	-	Psychological Foundations Reading	3 hrs. of
Sp. Ed. 507	-	Introduction to Consultative Collaboration	1 hr.
Sp. Ed. 508	-	Mentorship and Effective Teaching	1 hr.
Sp. Ed. 509	-	Transition: Planning and Implementation	1 hr.

3. Take and pass the state Multi-Subjects Content Specialization test (K-8) during the first six hours of certification coursework in Special Education.

Multiple criteria are used in arriving at a decision to admit students to the special education program. Each applicant is evaluated with reference to the following criteria: GRE scores, letters of recommendation, quality of content and written expression in the personal statement, undergraduate grade point average, and performance on graduate courses completed. Flexibility is maintained in the application of the criteria to individual cases through the use of a weighting scale.

If the applicant's weighted score falls below the acceptable minimum for admission as a degree or professional development student, the student may be eligible for provisional enrollment. A student who is on provisional status must take nine (9) hours of specified coursework with a GPA of 3.25 and then reapply for admission as a professional development student. Further, a student admitted as a professional development student may reapply for admission as a degree student if he/she completes all certification requirements with an overall GPA of 3.25.

DEGREE REQUIREMENTS

Each degree program includes all certification work for one of the specializations. Degree students follow a planned program of study and must maintain a cumulative grade point average of 3.0. Degree students are required to plan and implement an original research study in their area of specialization. Students must also pass a written comprehensive examination.

PROGRAM OF STUDIES
MASTER'S DEGREE IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

A master's degree may be earned with a specialization in one of three areas: Behavior Disorders, Mental Retardation or Specific Learning Disabilities. Students are responsible for checking all course descriptions for prerequisites.

Program Requirements for BD, MR, and SLD

Core Courses Required in BD, MR and SLD* 12 hrs.

Sp. Ed. 500	Introduction to Special Education
Sp. Ed. 550	Assessment in Special Education
Sp. Ed. 553	General Program Planning for Exceptional Children
Ed. 501	Seminar: Educational Research

Certification Area Specific Courses* 9 hrs.

Learning Disabilities

Sp. Ed. 504	Characteristics and Etiology - LD
Sp. Ed. 561	Program Planning/Implementation - LD
Sp. Ed. 610	Field Experience - LD

Behavior Disorders

Sp. Ed. 503	Characteristics and Etiology - BD
Sp. Ed. 556	Program Planning/Implementation - BD
Sp. Ed. 611	Field Experience - BD

Mental Retardation

Sp. Ed. 501	Characteristics and Etiology - MR
Sp. Ed. 559	Program Planning and Implementation - MR
Sp. Ed. 609	Field Experience - MR

Required Degree Courses 18 hrs.

Sp. Ed. 601	Sp. Ed. Research, Part I (3 hours)
Sp. Ed. 602	Sp. Ed. Research, Part II (3 hours)
Approved Electives (12 hours)	

Total Hours for Degree 39 hrs.

*Students must complete 12 hours of core courses and 9 hours of certification area specialization course to obtain initial certification in each area. Additional endorsements may be added with the completion of the 7 - 9 hours of certification areas specific courses.

ADDITIONAL CERTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS

All Special Education majors must take the Content Specialization test in the area(s) in which they seek endorsement, i.e., BD, SLD., and MR. The Special Education Content Specialization Test is taken at the end of the certification coursework in Special Education.

Students

This alternative program was initiated in the 1986-87 academic year. Since that time, 116 students from non-traditional backgrounds have sought admission to the program. The average student was 34.6 years of age, had two children and was otherwise fully employed. Only five students attended classes on a full-time basis. Additionally, these students were drawn from 33 of the state's 55 counties.

Course delivery

Delivery of coursework is always a challenge for an institution which has a "campus bound", a variety of techniques have been utilized to service rural students. Traditionally, the institution has relied heavily on a cadre of carefully selected adjunct faculty who join full-time faculty in traveling to one of the seven "distant" sites. In addition, both audio-only and video-teleconferencing (with audio bridge) are utilized to link distant sites with professors. To date, identification of cohort groups formed to participate in the preliminary block of coursework has been only partially implemented due to the geographic dispersion of these non-traditional students. Finally, a variety of alternative class meeting schedules have been developed to fit the nature of some coursework or a particular group of students.

Results

Students who participate in this alternative program typically have three competency tests to master in addition to coursework and prior to receiving a recommendation for certification. The special education program has utilized competency tests developed by the State Department of Education via contract with National Evaluation Systems for this purpose. The first is the Preprofessional Skills Test (PPST) which measures basic skills in the areas of mathematics, reading and writing. This test is waived for applicants with acceptable performance levels on either the ACT (25) or an SAT score of 1035 or for those holding a graduate degree. Results thus far are summarized in Table 1.

TABLE 1

NUMBER OF EXAMINEES AND PASS RATES FOR PPST BY INSTITUTION AND STATE

	Institution (alternative program)	State
Number of Examinees	41	9346
Examinee Pass Rate (%)	90.2	92.3

The second competency test was the Multi-Subject Test (Grades K-8). This test was typically required by students exiting four year early/middle childhood (K-8) teacher preparation programs. An underlying assumption of all K-12 special education certification programs described earlier is that the non-traditional student will be able to demonstrate those skills by successfully completing this test. Results to date are summarized in Table 2.

TABLE 2

NUMBER OF EXAMINEES AND PASS RATES FOR MST (K-8) BY INSTITUTION AND STATE

	Institution (alternative program)	State
Number of Examinees	78	3114
Percent Passing	87.2	92.1

Having successfully mastered the first two competency test requirements, the student is eligible to complete the remaining certification coursework, the clinically supervised practicum and the final exceptionality-specific (SLD, BD or MR) competency test required for certification. Results to date are summarized in Table 3.

TABLE 3

NUMBER OF EXAMINEES AND PASS RATES FOR SP. ED. COMPETENCY TESTS BY INSTITUTION AND STATE

	Institution (alternative program)	State
Number of Examinees	66	1248
Pass Rate (%)	98.5	96.4

The basic premise for the development of the alternative program was that attracting quality adults from non-education backgrounds might have a stabilizing effect on retention rates of special educators in rural settings. The following summary table describes the results of a follow-up study which tracked the retention rates for students completing the program.

TABLE 4

RETENTION RATES FOR ALTERNATIVE PROGRAM (SUMMARY)

.	Total Number Licensed	62	
.	Number initially employed in-state	55	(88.7%)
.	Number currently employed in-state	49	(79.0%)
.	Number employed in system originally hiring	43	(69.4%)

Discussion

Of a total of 116 students from non-traditional backgrounds who have sought special education licensure through this alternative route, 62 have completed all certification requirements. It is important to note the effect of the succession of competency testing requirements upon the terminal licensure testing success ratios for the alternative program. On the surface, it appears that these screens have successfully filtered the applicants for desirable qualities and potential as is evident in the high success rate for those at the final competency determination level of testing. One limitation of the study (and one that bears further investigation) is the fact that the competency testing utilized specify minimum competency levels rather than more advanced performance standards.

"States report that more than 20,000 people have been licensed through alternative certification programs since 1985" (National Center for Education Information, 1993). It is the belief of this writer that those students who have completed this alternative certification track meet the most important performance criterion of being "safe to practice", a standard proposed by Williamson et al. in 1985. Because the turnover rate for these special educators was significantly diminished, one more puzzle piece may be added in the effort to serve special needs students in rural settings.

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